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ABSTRACT

A Salisbury State University (Maryland) program integrating intensive French language and business administration instruction is described. In its pilot, the program had 11 students, all but 1 drawn from French language classes; one was a native speaker. The French portion was taught in the morning by two French professors, and the business component in the afternoon by two business professors fluent in French. A single language textbook was selected and supplemented with readings and exercises from two business and economics texts and by video tapes taken from French television broadcasts. One video tape and related comprehension exercises were used for pre- and post-tests. Despite the relatively short course, substantial student progress was realized, attributed to: (1) the immersion experience, (2) emphasis on business culture, and (3) student motivation. Class activities were varied to lessen the boredom of all-day classes. They included vocabulary study, listening exercises, pre-reading exercises, lectures on business culture, oral presentations, field trips, and a capstone project assessing the feasibility of marketing a French product in the United States. Students responded to the course positively, were aware of their own substantial progress, and suggested a longer course or similar courses in other languages in future. (MSE)

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Preparation for International Business: A Cultural Immersion Model in France

Dr. Gerry St.Martin

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Fourth Annual EMU Conference on Languages and Communication
World Business and the Professions
Dr. Gerry St. Martin, Salisbury State University
Thursday, April 6, 1995 11:00 a.m. - 12:30 p.m.
"Preparation for International Business: A Cultural Immersion Model in French.

Salisbury State University is a small comprehensive university on the Eastern Shore of Maryland between the Atlantic Ocean and the Chesapeake Bay. The total enrollment is approximately 5,000 students, undergraduate and graduate (to the M.A. in some disciplines including the M.B.A.) To provide some perspective, it is important to note that the language faculty is small: five for the whole department; of equal import is that the Business School faculty is enormous by our standards with roughly 36 faculty. While the courses I am about to discuss were given at a relatively small institution, the lessons we learned and the success we had may be of some use to similar programs at any institution in the country.

This experience, as first offered in the Winter Term of 1993 at Salisbury State University then, was funded by a joint grant from Peat Marwick and the American Association of Universities which paid professors' stipends for creating the course, the professors' salaries and field trips in which all participated. It was, in fact, two courses at three credits each over a four week period for a total of five hours of class four days a week.

The French language portion met in the morning and was staffed by two language professors. The Business section met in the afternoon and was staffed by two professors, both fluent in French, from the Franklin P. Perdue School of Business.

There were eleven students, ten female and one male, whose linguistic ability in French ranged from intermediate (low) to advanced high: there was one native speaker in the group. This class composition was the result of substantial discussion about the minimum level of student competency in French needed to maximize student success in the course. While completion of second semester French was at first considered, the final cut was made at the fourth semester. In fact, the students self selected: while we made this course available (with considerable misgivings) to second semester students of French, none below the fourth semester opted to take the Winter course. This fortuitous grouping may have been the result of our emphasis on the immersion nature of the course during our announcements. If there **had** been some second semester students in the class, the whole experience would have been substantially different (and perhaps less successful) from the one I am about to describe.

Clearly, the pool of students involved all came, with one exception, from our French language classes. There were few Business majors with a ready grasp of French, or any other language for that matter. There are still few, two and one half years later. International Business is getting more and more attention, however, and we are hopeful but only marginally, that

this will lead to an increased interest in the study of foreign languages and cultures among the Business students at our university.

The primary text chosen for the French section of the course was Du Tac au tac. It was supplemented with readings and exercises from two other texts which focused on the type of vocabulary which might help the students understand better the readings in French they were to do in the afternoon session with the Business professors. We also used video tapes in French from France Panorama which are news items taken from French news broadcasts. As a primary text, Du Tac au tac suited our purposes well since it was flexible in design, allowing us either to move from chapter to chapter, or to skip chapters depending on the material we felt the students needed most, whether this material was written, oral, or aural. It was important also that the text emphasize communicative competency and provide ample practice within the framework of the classroom for this critical form of oral expression. We felt committed to developing student confidence in oral expression since, in the culminating experience of the afternoon business section, they were to do a case (feasibility) study entirely in French.

The supplementary texts used were Economie et finance (Schmitt & Lutz) and Business Situations - French (Castley & Wight). Both of these text and material from Français Commercial (Denise Guback) contained readings about economics, international commerce, international finance, unemployment and inflation among

other topics from which the students were to study vocabulary, discuss articles and about which they were to answer questions of both content and language. While the students found the articles and the vocabulary study rather daunting, they were able to see the connection between this material and the readings that formed an integral part of their Business session in the afternoon. The students found it helpful as well that we did not require that they memorize all the vocabulary associated with any given article. Rather, we selected from the enormous amount of new vocabulary what amounted to roughly fifteen to twenty percent of the new words and told the students that they were going to be held responsible for these on tests and quizzes. In this way, we were hoping to create a base of active vocabulary which was targeted to and would become an important tool for the Business part this combined course while suggesting that the rest of the vocabulary associated with a given topic might be useful as passive vocabulary when "skimming and scanning" an article in French for general content.

The course itself began in combined sessions on the first day's class so that the students could meet all the professors involved in the courses. For the French language section, after some preliminary remarks about expectations for the course, we showed a video from France Panorama. The segment we chose, while some years old at that time, was a news clip about the closing of the Renault factory outside Paris. The level of language used was quite high (with regional accents, slang and angry words) and

contained a fair number of business terms associated with the closing of such an important local economic force. It was, therefore, difficult for the students. Students were given a series of questions about the video and were told that their answers were not to be graded in the traditional sense; the video was shown twice and the students were given fifteen minutes or so to answer the questions. These completed questionnaires were collected, marked, and kept until the end of the course. This initial listening/viewing exercise yielded very little comprehension among the students except for the native speaker in the group.

This exercise was essentially a pre-test. Our post test was the same video and questions which we gave to the students at the end of the course. The improvement was dramatic. During the rest of course, no mention was made of the video, nor was any of the vocabulary taught targeted specifically to the video, but the student's comprehension of that particular video segment increased by an average of at least 50% by the end of the course.

There were several reasons for this substantial progress over such a short period of time. Among these, three stand out: first, the immersion experience itself which had the students speaking, reading, writing and listening to French four days a week for two and one half hours at the beginning and progressing to five hours during the last weeks of class; second, the emphasis, among the grammatical and cultural concepts treated, on the business world, through readings and videos and, finally, the

self motivation of the students themselves who were, by the second week, beginning preparation for their feasibility study in French.

One of the ways we helped the students prepare for the case study, was to do some prereading exercises on a few of the more difficult articles in French that the students were expected to read as an assignment for the afternoon business section. These pre-reading activities focused on reducing student tension and subsequent frustration when they were faced with a difficult reading from the business world. These techniques are not new, to be sure, and are used in many language programs across the country but we found that the value of relaxed skimming and scanning **before** an attempt at detailed reading comprehension was even more valuable when the content of the article was so very different (and more difficult) from the readings the students had encountered previously in their various language classes. The pressure to get the article read and understood was greater in this case than, say, an assignment for a composition course in French. In our courses, time was very short and the feasibility study loomed ever so ominously.

The morning session in French language began almost immediately on an immersion level. In the first two days, roughly one fifth of the time was spent exposing and discussing cultural givens particular to French society and to the French business world. These short segments in English were intended to decrease the affective filters which sometimes impede student

participation in foreign language classes, to provide a base of cultural information from which to generate discussion in French a few days hence and to abate tension and apprehension about the intensity of this necessarily short course. After these two days, the morning course was taught entirely in French including lectures on the notions of time, space and American/French stereotypes of the others' society.

We tried to vary the activities in such a way as to lessen the boredom which is almost inherent in a long class. Each day, but in a different order, we would do some vocabulary study from an assigned reading, have students work in groups (most times pairing "weaker" students with the stronger), do listening exercises from a cassette provided with Du Tac au tac, show videos with written questions from France Panorama as well as videos which highlighted the importance of a foreign language in career opportunities. Every sixth day or so we would have a lecture on some cultural material which the students could expect to find on any of the four tests associated with the French part of the course. Topics here included the use of time as a negotiating tool (tardiness or "waiting" vs punctuality), so called "business" luncheons, the inappropriateness, in other cultures, of certain personal questions in "small talk", gestures, body language and so on.

Many of the activities done either in pairs or in groups of three or four were primarily communicative: that is, students were expected to get certain information using appropriate forms

of address, say, from members of their group and proceed to seeking similar information from the other groups. Here, errors were not specifically corrected except in a general way, with comment from the professors about the **group's** activity once the activity was done, or, rarely, direct intervention when any error interfered with communication. Generally, though, students learned to use various forms of circumlocution when the vocabulary they needed to accomplish the task was either forgotten or totally unfamiliar. These task oriented activities guided students to seek specific kinds of information (biographical, social, anecdotal) and increased students' confidence in forming and asking questions in appropriate language.

Other oral activities were designed to monitor **both** communicative and linguistic competency. These exercises often took the form of short oral presentations (one to two minutes maximum) the preparation for which was done either in pairs or as an individual effort. Here, students were given graded, specific and written feedback on pronunciation, intonation, use and level of language, grammar and ease of delivery. In addition to being an important part of the French Language portion of the five hour course, these short oral presentations helped prepare the students for the longer and much more detailed presentation they were to make in the capstone portion of the afternoon Business section.

This capstone feasibility study, designed and guided by one

of the two Business professors began by giving the students the task of determining which product from France they would market in the United States. The students decided among themselves, with appropriate counsel, on a crêperie. Once this decision was made, material was gathered from various sources about such concerns as infrastructure needs, product consistency, market conditions and location.

Among the field trips planned for the course was one to the French Consulate in Washington, D.C. While the presentation by the consulate staff in French about International Business with France was interesting to the faculty, few of the students shared the professors' intrigue. More important to the students was the planned stop at the newly refurbished Union Station in Washington, D.C. since this train depot was considered to be a hypothetical site for the crêperie which was to be the focus of the feasibility study. There the students made note of the sorts of businesses already on site, possible competition, potential client traffic, etc.

The other field trip served a similar but less pointed function. We visited the Delsey Luggage plant in Denton Maryland. This French enterprise was run at the time by Didier Godbille, Vice President of Manufacturing. It was Mr. Godbille who was kind enough to give us a personal tour, conducted entirely in French, of the plant and facilities. Among the subjects presented were inventory control, production schedules, the production line itself and marketing strategies for the

American consumer. The students were surprised to find that they could understand more than they expected and were pleased to have the chance to ask employment related questions in French of Mr. Godbille at the end of the tour.

The field trips themselves provided another opportunity for the students to write follow up, thank you letters or both to our hosts. These letters, of course, were written in French, in formats that are acceptable and conform to common usage in Business correspondence in France. By the end of the course, then, the students had used all four skills of speaking, writing, reading, and listening in ways that were not only functional in the classroom sense but real.

Once the course was over, the students were asked to evaluate the course and provide input about any future ventures of this sort. Their responses were telling. All the students felt that my colleague and I were great teachers. While this universal opinion was gratifying to us, we were more pleased with the students' assessment of their own progress in the course. Regardless of the grades they received, all students saw a marked improvement of their language skills, their motivation and confidence. This opinion was in fact borne out by the improvement on the listening/viewing post test from the France Panorama video.

Most students felt, however, that course was too short and suggested an identical course which would be taught over a semester or two with the French language portion on Monday,

Wednesday and Friday and the Business session on Tuesday and Thursday. There is merit to this suggestion but it results in a sort of "catch twenty two." The course and the language component connected to Business were successful **precisely** because there were whole blocks of unified time devoted to the task at hand. Taught during a regular semester, the immersion effect of the course would be diluted by all the other responsibilities required of students taking a normal load of semester long courses.

In fact some students saw the need for a four year program which would use some of the immersion techniques used in that Winter course, with similar but more extensive vocabulary study and more time spent on business readings in French. There was also the suggestion that **two** languages be required and that this preparation be formally associated with a degree in International Business.

The students also agreed with our own estimate that the minimum level of French needed to do this course was the fourth semester with a fifth semester extremely desirable. The students also wanted more cooperation between the two segments of the course since, while we were involved in some of the reading students were doing for the afternoon course, we were not very involved in the preparation of the case study itself, largely because there was little time to give at the end of our course for the sort of intensive help the students felt they needed.

Since the course has not been offered again, we have not

been able to implement these modifications. But should there be a similar effort in the future we would certainly respond to the students' and our own criticism of the course as presented in 1993. Very likely we would insist on a fourth semester proficiency to begin with. The text we used, might be replaced by one with a more specific focus on the business world without neglecting grammar and communicative skills and for the videos, as successful as our were, we might consider Hatier's new publication Le Français des affaires par la video with its accompanying student handbook. We would also seek to be more linguistically involved in the preparation of the feasibility study since this experience was central to the Business part of the courses and caused the greatest amount of anxiety to the students. In order to do that, however, we might need to increase the number of contact hours for the courses so that the total credits available to the student would go from six to perhaps nine for the two course experience. But, again, this amount of contact obviates placing this course in a normal Fall or Spring course schedule at our university and practically forces us to put the course in a Winter session or, perhaps more desirably, in a Summer session which is a bit longer.

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